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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINS KISL PINR I2

SUBJECT: MOSQUE ORATORS ACROSS SOUTH CENTRAL IRAQ CALL FOR MUSLIM UNITY; SADRISTS BLAME "OCCUPIERS," CLAIM INNOCENCE

REF: HILLAH 0033

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Sunni and Shi'a mosque preachers in Najaf, Babil, Wasit and Karbala called for the unity of all Muslims during Friday, March 3 prayers. A Babil Province Sadrists mosque orator blamed attempts to sow sectarian discord on the "occupiers," while a Sadrists preacher in Najaf claimed that Sadrists are innocent of charges that they were responsible for the wave of violent attacks against Sunnis and their mosques in the aftermath of the February 22 Al-Askariyah Shrine bombing. Orators in Babil mosques affiliated with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani disregarded politics and preached upon strictly religious themes, although the imam of the Imam Hussein Shrine in Karbala, a Sistani representative, blamed security failures on the Coalition Forces. End summary.

SADRISTS URGE UNITY; BLAME "OCCUPIERS"

¶12. (C) More than 1,000 worshippers from Najaf and surrounding provinces attended Friday prayers March 3 at the Kufa Mosque in Najaf, according to SET Najaf local staff. Mahdi Militia members armed with AK-47 assault rifles guarded the mosque and the road leading to it. The preacher, Shaykh Ali Al-Noaimi, condemned the Al-Askariyah bombing and called for all Iraqis to unite against the "invasion" and to avoid sectarian war. The shaykh emphasized that Sadrists were not responsible for the wave of attacks on Sunni mosques that occurred in the aftermath of the Al-Askariyah bombing. And he announced a protest against the "invaders," to be held in Baghdad on March 11 (Reftel).

¶13. (C) Sadrists mosque preachers in Babil and Wasit echoed the sermons of the Kufa orator. Shaykh Fadhil of Al-Hillah's Sadrists Imam Ali Mosque urged more than 100 worshippers there to refrain from violence and taking up arms, according to REO Al-Hillah local staff. He explained that the attendees were not to attack Sunni mosques, arguing that the Sunnis are the brothers of the Shi'a. The shaykh blamed the "occupiers" for the present sectarian tension, saying that the occupying forces wanted Iraq to fall into civil war. He instructed the worshippers to go to the Kufa Mosque to receive directions about an upcoming demonstration.

¶14. (C) At the Al-Akbar Mosque in Al-Kut, a Sadrists shrine in Wasit Province, the orator compared the Al-Askariyah bombing to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. Speaking before a crowd of as many as 2,000, according to REO local staff, the orator

instructed his congregation to refrain from participating in any violence.

KARBALA IMAM BLAMES COALITION FORCES

¶ 15. (C) At Karbala's Imam Hussein Shrine, senior Sistani representative Sayid Ahmed Al-Safi blamed Coalition Forces for the poor security and said that it was part of a plan to keep terrorists occupied in Iraq rather than have them attempt to attack America. Speaking before a crowd of about 7,000 worshippers, Al-Safi refuted accusations that calls for demonstrations by the Hawza after the Al-Askariyah bombing caused the sectarian violence that followed the incident. On the contrary, he rejoined, the Hawza prevented more violence, and stands for the unity of all Iraqis: Sunni, Shi'a, Turkmen, and Christian.

¶ 16. (C) Al-Safi said that the "Occupation Forces" have the final responsibility for Iraq's security matters, and the tenuous security situation in Iraq is their fault. He charged that the "Americans" are getting in the way of Iraqis attempting to fight terrorists in such places as Tal Afar. "There is a plan to make Iraq a 'valley' for the national terrorists, in order to keep them from the American lands," he said.

SHI'A CALLS FOR UNITY, AND RELIGIOUS THEMES

¶ 17. (C) At the Najaf Fatimiyah Mosque, which is affiliated with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Najaf SCIRI Head Sadr Al-Deen Al-Qubanji called upon Iraqis to unite against Baathists and extremists. Preaching to a crowd of about 500, including some Najaf Provincial Council (PC) members, and guarded by heavily armed Iraqi Police (IP) and members of the Badr Organization, Al-Qubanji demanded that the Shi'a, not the Sunni, be given the responsibility for protecting the Al-Askariyah Mosque in Samarra. Al-Qubanji also urged the

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politicians to quickly form a national government, and emphasized that the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) still stood behind Ibrahim Jafari, the UIA's nominee to serve as Prime Minister in the new Iraqi government.

¶ 18. (C) The imams of two Sistani-affiliated mosques in Babil, Al-Mashita and Bin Idrees, refrained from preaching politics and spoke on purely religious themes. The sermons at these mosques were dedicated to mourning the death of one of the Shi'a imams, Ali bin Hussein.

SUNNIS URGE UNITY, THANK MADHI MILITIA FOR PROTECTION

¶ 19. (C) In Babil and Wasit, Sunnis also called for unity and condemned violent reprisals after the Al-Askariyah bombing. At the Sunni Al-Hitawein Mosque in Al-Hillah, Shaykh Mohammed Al-Fatih condemned both the Al-Askariyah bombing and the lethal response to it. He blamed the violence on Imperialism and Takfiris (extremist Sunnis). Al-Fatih told approximately 80 worshippers that Sunnis and Shi'a were both Muslims, and that the holy places of each must be protected and not attacked. He further thanked the Mahdi Militia for protecting Sunni mosques.

¶ 10. (C) In Wasit, the orator of the Sunni Al-Kabeer Mosque, in Al-Kut, delivered a virtually identical message, arguing that both Sunnis and Shi'a are Muslims and attacks targeting either sect are wrong, as they each targeted Muslims. He called for unity in the face of "this wave of terrorism."

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